MUM'S TORMENT Girl, 14, was ‘groomed, murdered and ground into kebab meat’ – but her family’s nightmare isn’t over

Grace Macaskill | Ann Cusack
Published: 13:39, 10 Jul 2023

HEARTBROKEN Karen Downes’ head span as she struggled to cope with the enormity of the words spoken in the crowded courtroom.

Moments after h.....earing her 14-year-old daughter Charlene had most likely been murdered, cut up and grou.....nd into kebab meat, Karen fled, throwing up in a nearby toilet.

6

Charlene Downes disappeared aged 14 in Blackpool 20 years ago Credit: PA:Press Association

6

Karen and Bob Downes have been searching for answers for two decades Credit: Mirrorpix

Advertisement

“It was the first time I’d heard what might have happened to my daughter and I felt disgusted and sick to the stomach,” says Karen.

“ How do you cope with hearing something like that?

“It has tormented me all these years and I have to face the reality we might never find Charlene’s body.”

Twenty years after Charlene vanished, desperate Karen is pinning her hopes that a crack team specialising in cold cases can finally uncover the truth about her daughter’s killing.

Daughter vanished

Charlene disappeared into the bright lights of Blackpool on November 1, 2003, never to be seen again.

Cops believe the teenager was the victim of sexual exploitation, swapping sex for bags of chips after being groomed by a gang of mainly Asian men.

She made 13 visits to a sexual health clinic in the two years before she vanished

She made 13 visits to a sexual health clinic in the two years before she vanished.

Two men accused of killing Charlene were never convicted by a jury, which was unable to reach a verdict on their guilt. A retrial was ruled out amid concerns about evidence gathered by Lancashire Constabulary.

Dr Kirsty Bennett, a lecturer at Leeds Trinity University and an expert in cold cases, is leading a new team to try to discover what happened to Charlene.

She is working with the family and the Justice for Charlene Downes campaign, which previously hired a private investigator to look at the case.

Karen, 57, who still lives in Blackpool, knows it's the last throw-of-the-dice.

She said: "Not a day goes by that I don't think of my Charlene. I never sleep. I can't carry on with life. I am still stuck on that day.

"Since she disappeared I have had a candle burning in my window – and it still burns today. I hope and pray for justice.

Advertisement

"The years go by and the pain doesn't get any easier at all. I need to know where she is."

Cops believe Charlene was murdered within hours of disappearing in Blackpool city centre.

Her murder uncovered a dark side of the faded seaside town after a police report revealed Charlene was one of 60 girls – some as young as eleven – who had been groomed by takeaway workers. The girls were given food and cigarettes in exchange for sex acts.

6

Iyad Albattikhi, who ran the Funny Boyz takeaway in Blackpool, was charged with Charlene's murder before being cleared Credit: Johnston Press

6

CCTV footage shows Charlene with her sister Rebecca in the last time she was seen publicly

Advertisement

Detectives allege that Charlene has been strangled and dismembered, and that her killers joked about having turned her flesh into kebab meat and her bones into tiling grout – after she threatened to blow the whistle on them.

In 2007, Iyad Albattikhi, then 27, who ran the Funny Boyz takeaway in Blackpool, was charged with Charlene's murder. His landlord and business partner Mohammed Reveshi was charged with helping him dispose of her body.

They went on trial in May 2007 when the jury was played taped conversations in

which it was alleged Iyad had joked that he killed the girl, that she was ‘chopped up’ and her body had ‘gone into the kebabs’.

The jury failed to reach a verdict and a retrial was also dropped after a police watchdog found the investigation by Lancashire Constabulary was ‘handled unprofessionally’ and plagued by a ‘catalogue of errors’.

Serious doubts were also uncovered over the way transcripts were made.

Advertisement

Both men were paid £250,000 each in compensation. One of the men’s lawyers accused the police of “incompetence, manipulation and lies”.

Never-ending hell

Karen has been to hell and back since losing her daughter.

Suspicion first fell on husband Bob and, as police searched the family home, they found counselling records for a woman called Martina Peters.

When Karen asked ex-soldier Bob who the woman was he admitted Martina was him – and he was undergoing counselling for transgender issues. Despite problems the couple have stuck together, united in grief.

Just before Christmas 2021, Charlene’s younger brother Robert, 30, died of an accidental drugs overdose, heaping more pain on the family.

Advertisement

Karen later said he never got over his sister’s death and that he used to climb out of his bedroom to look for her in the early days.

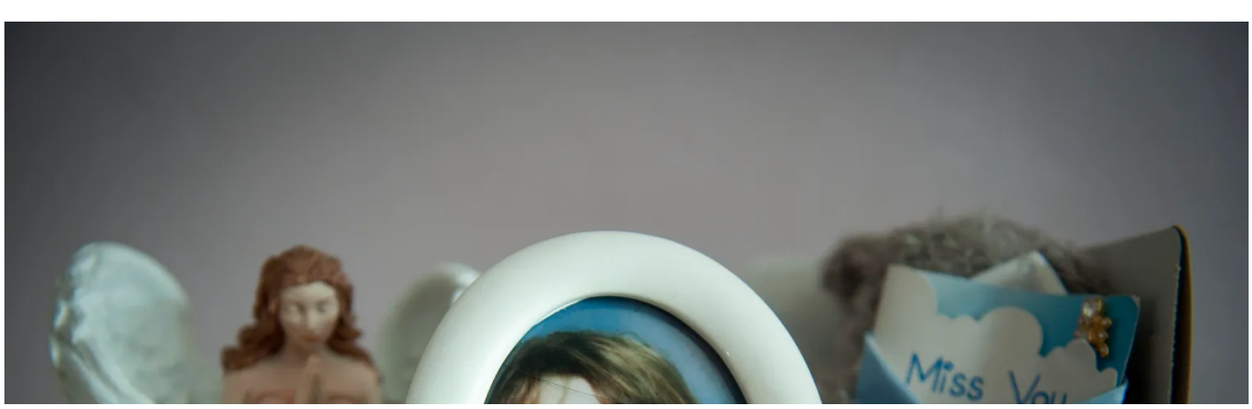
“Her disappearance cost his life. It also killed my mum. She couldn’t cope with it. I hope they’re all together in heaven. It’s my only comfort,” she said.

“I have eight grandchildren now who bring me so much joy yet I can’t help thinking how happy I would be if Charlene had her own children and what she would be like. Life is always – ‘what if?”

In November, to mark the 20th anniversary of Charlene’s disappearance, Karen will lead a candlelit vigil outside the church where the teenager attended Sunday school.

Charlene shortly before her disappearance Credit: Focus Features

Advertisement



6

Charlene's family has been torn apart Credit: Ki Price – The Times

She says she has lost faith in police ever finding out what happened to her daughter and hopes the new investigation will uncover fresh forensics.

Karen said: "I last spoke with the police in March this year but it was the same update – no update – and it is so frustrating. I am fed up with the police. I have lost all faith in them.

"There have been so many awful rumours about what happened to her and as her mum it is hard to take.

"I don't like the term 'cold case' because to me the case has never been closed so how can it be reopened?

Advertisement

A man was arrested on suspicion of Charlene's murder in August 2017 but is now no longer under suspicion, Lancashire Police say.

The force says a £100,00 reward is still on offer for information leading to the conviction of Charlene's killers – or the recovery of her body.